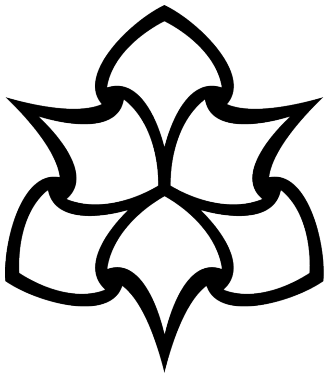

Welcoming a Torah to Northwood:

On the Anthropology of Religion and Performance Studies

Joshua Edelman
Manchester Metropolitan University

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On Sunday, 17 March, 2015, the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue of the north London neighbourhood of Northwood did something most synagogues will do once in their lifetimes, if they are lucky – they completed the writing of a new scroll of Torah, the key Jewish sacred text and, as such, the most significant liturgical object in Jewish worship. This chapter will describe and analyse the ritual welcoming of that scroll to the community.

In doing so, I hope also to demonstrate the ways in which the discipline of performance studies can offer helpful complement to linguistic and anthropological models of the study of religion. The discipline of performance studies developed out of theatre studies in the 1960s and 1970s out of a conversation between cultural anthropology and the experimental theatre and performance art world that was questioning the nature of artistic action at the time, especially in the galleries and small theatres of downtown New York. But in recent years, that link between the social scientific study of performance and its artistic cousin has become strained to the breaking point. The initial impulse that those who study religious ritual and those who study performance are working with overlapping sets of material is, of course, completely correct. The two disciplines have developed distinct interests and analytical methods in the past half century each of which, I would argue, could benefit from a dialogue with the other. In working through this example, then, I hope to indicate how this dialogue might be academically useful.

I will begin with a brief description of the ceremony, and then offer an analysis of it from both the anthropological and the performative perspectives, before offering an analysis that attempts an integration of the two. The welcoming ceremony is called a *hachnesat sefer torah;* literally, the 'bringing in of a book of *torah*,' and it was designed to commemorate the completion of the writing of a new formal Torah scroll that would be used in the synagogue's worship. (The Torah, which literally means 'teaching,' is the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.) A torah is traditionally

written by hand on animal-skin parchment by a master scribe called a *sofer* and bound as a scroll around two elaborately decorated wooden supports.

The event began in the synagogue itself, where, in the sanctuary, the almost-finished scroll was laid out on a table under the chuppah, or wedding canopy. One after another, individually or in families, members and their families were invited up to hold the sofer's hand as he filled in one of the final few dozen letters of the scroll. Each time, the sofer had a small chat with the person holding his arm, chose an appropriate letter, and offered a blessing. This took a while, and the atmosphere was informal; people stood around, angled for a better view, chatted, took photos, or went to the next room for tea and cake.

When the last word had been finished, the *sofer* rolled the scroll back to the Ten Commandments, and asked the synagogue's senior rabbi to read them out loud. This done, the congregation of several dozen took up the newly completed scroll, wrapped it in white, and paraded it down the stairs and out onto the streets of Northwood under a makeshift canopy of a prayer shawl on four sticks (this, too, invokes a wedding canopy). The procession was led by the rabbi on guitar, and the group sang the sort of simple, traditional Hebrew songs one might find at a Jewish wedding or other celebration.

The procession went down the main street of Northwood, past shops and pubs and bus stops and quite a few surprised and confused locals. (There were half a dozen Metropolitan Police officers across the street, watching the situation.) The procession stopped in front of a tree next to a public parking lot. There, the senior rabbi explained that the mother of the tree they were standing in front of had been planted by a teacher and her young students at in January of 1943 in the Theresinstadt concentration camp, which served as a symbol of hope, nurtured by each successive group of children who passed through. After the war, it was moved to Terezin Cemetary as a memorial. Two members of the Northwood synagogue had taken seedlings from the tree when they visited in 1996, had nourished them at their homes in London, and one of those had grown into this tree here.[1] This was all the more poignant as the original Terezin tree had been destroyed by flooding in 2004. The assembled group recited the Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, and then turned around and paraded back into the synagogue with more songs of praise and thanksgiving (all in Hebrew, and most of which, of course, take their text from the very Torah being brought in). There, the scroll was paraded around the crowded room, with still more song, until it was brought under the canopy to join its sister scrolls (that is, the older scrolls that the synagogue was already using). The most basic of Jewish prayers, the Shema, was

[1] The other grows now at Beth Shalom, the Holocaust Centre in Nottinghamshire, England.

recited and sung, and a few more blessings of thanksgiving and praise were spoken and sung (a few in English, composed for the occasion). The new scroll and the old on were put away, and with a final prayer, the events was over. Most people went home, though a few lingered for cups of tea.

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Most scholars of religion would initially look to textual precedents for this ritual – which is not unreasonable for an event that, quite literally, celebrates a text. The key precedent within the biblical text itself is II Samuel 6, which describes the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. At that ceremony, musical instruments were played and King David danced 'with all his might' (2 Samuel 6:14). This connection, then, would be made between the Biblical Ark, which biblical tradition claims contained the stone tablets of law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the Ark of the contemporary synagogue, which contains the torah scrolls which, too, are taken in some sense 'from Sinai.' Such scholars would place this ceremony in this centuries-old tradition of celebration as well as other ritual acts of scribal work and reverence for the Torah (restrictions on how it can be carried, stored, read, and so on), whether or not the participants that day in Northwood had any knowledge of these precedents. Scholars likely would compare this ritual to other ritual traditions that used similar symbolic elements such as the canopy, repeated circular processions, and joyous group dancing: the annual commemoration of the revelation on Sinai known as *Simchat Torah,* but most importantly, Jewish wedding ceremonies. The explanation here, again, would be textual: the common biblical and Rabbinic image of God as groom and the Jewish people as bride, with the Torah as the ring which binds them.

Much of the focus here would also be on the key symbols present in the ceremony, symbols which, in the minds of some anthropologists, may be culturally specific but can equally point to trans-cultural patterns of religious understanding. In the *Hachnesat*, the Torah is the obvious such symbol. While of course is it a quintessentially Jewish symbol, it would be hard not to see it as what Mercea Eliade called an *axis mundi*—a central pillar around which the world is organized and, literally, revolves, a connection between heaven and earth, and frequently the site of revelation or the (past or ongoing) presence of a divinity. Eliade sees the Hindu lingam as one of these, the Aboriginal totem, the Kaba'a in Mecca, the Cross on Calvary, and so on. When the Torah is processed, with the tribe following it, being danced around, and serenaded with references to it with the traditional name *Etz*

Chayim, the Tree of Life, the theory fits too well not to deserve a mention.[2] It would also o accident that the memory of Terezin is also a tree, a tree of life in another sense, and that one tree needs to visit and pay symbolic homage to its predecessor.

Those anthropologists who did not see ritual as a mere contemporary working-out of ancient text might also see in this the liberal Jewish liturgical tradition that has developed since the late 19th century in Germany, and then in the UK and US. They would note in particular the use of guitar and the particular songs sung as the legacy of Debbie Friedman and the new, folk-rock sensibility she injected into liberal Judaism through guitar-led song circles at American summer camps in the 1980s.[3] They may look at the age range of participants and realise that the current crop of young leaders – now in their 30s and 40s – were the ones most influenced by this development, and note that two of the three rabbis leading this congregation fall firmly in that demographic.

The more comparative amongst them would also make connections to other religious rituals of celebration and completion, such as harvest festivals and ceremonies of thanksgiving for military victories. They might also see a link to rites of passage, as the *Hachnesat* is literally an inauguration, where a new and recognized social status is created: what begins as a piece of parchment becomes holy scripture. The procession, moving from set-apart sacred space through the public streets and back into the sacred space, would echo ceremonies of victory or sovereignty. Like similar processions of statues or images of the gods or saints (or their relics) through the public streets in Hindu, Buddhist, and Catholic traditions, it both marks an important event in the life of the religious community and the assertion of some sense of the primacy of the sacred over the secular sphere. These scholars would also likely note how extraordinarily rare such public assertions are in diaspora Judaism, at least outside of Orthodox enclaves with a majority-Jewish population. They would also note that, unlike harvest festivals or many carnivals, this was not an annual event but a once-in-a-generation one, and that it is likely it was the only one any of its participants ever had (or ever would) participate in. That might helpfully contextualize this unusual and hard to account for assertion of primacy (which most participants would deny was something they wanted to assert).

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2 This would only be encouraged by the fact that the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue's (seldom-used) formal Hebrew name is *Etz Chayim.*

3 I have discussed this further in 'The Debbie Friedman Problem: Performing Tradition, Memory and Modernity in Today's Progressive Jewish Liturgy', *Liturgy* 28 (2013), no. 1, pp. 6-17.

What this contextualization does necessarily do is to place this ritual into an ontological or structural category called 'ritual,' one which is inherently different from other categories of human action (such as, for example, aesthetic performance). This might not have been the case a century ago, where structuralist influences from Claude Lévi-Strauss or Emile Durkheim. Contemporary scholars are less likely to see such categories as holding a necessary, transcultural or universal status. Instead, they may treat these categories as emic and negotiable, looking for evidence of their use within the anthropological record. For the *Hachnesat,* that internal categorization does exist—the location, liturgical language, and other factors clearly place it within the category of Jewish worship— but its movement outside of the synagogue and guitar-based music do question that somewhat.

In her influential work, ritual theorist Catherine Bell has described and critiqued the tradition in religious studies of using the concept of 'ritual' as a means of synthesising the antithetical dichotomy of thought and action.[4] As she describes, however, this attempt to understand ritual as the union of thought and action is only temporarily effective; soon, ritual becomes condemned as meaningless action ('empty') and the primacy of thought over action is reasserted. The problem here is that this assertion of primary has a difficult political history; it has been associated with a Protestant supremacist attitude which has been linked both with anti-Catholicism and the cultural denigration of non-Christian religious life worldwide. The valorizing of verbally-articulated belief and theology over lived action has had and continues to have the effect of privileging western Protestant notions of religion over others. Bell notes that too many of her colleagues fail to take account of the political effect of their own work:

> Ritual studies, as a recent mode of discourse, has claimed an odd exemption from the general critique that scholarship distorts and exploits, tending to see itself, by virtue of its interest in ritual performance per se, as somehow able to transcend the politics of those who study and those who are studied.[5]

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[4] See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[5] Bell, *Ritual Theory,* ix. While Bell does not discuss this herself, I notice that same dynamic at work in the dichotomy between 'religious' and 'spiritual' which has, in recent decades, has seemed to gain an interpretative utility in the post-secular West. Those (generally Westerners) who are happy to identify themselves as 'spiritual,' in opposition to those (often non-Westerners, or at least those with less sophistication) who practice rote or traditional or stifling 'religion' are perhaps offering an uncomfortable echo of these earlier, exclusivist claims. The idea that spiritual experience is somehow more 'authentic' or 'sincere'

As a less problematic alternative, she suggests that scholars should shift their focus from the category of ritual to the processes of ritualization—that is, the means by which ordinary acts are marked out as extraordinary and as functioning at a supramundane level.[6] Bell spells out the processes by which ritualization tends to take place—formalism, invariance, traditionalism, rule-governance, and so on. In our case, this list enables us to talk about how the *Hachnesat* has been ritualized to a large degree, but not entirely. The casual conversation and tea while the first letters were being completed, the exit from the sacred space, and the relative casualness of the dancing, singing and conversation are ways in which the event was *less* ritualized than perhaps it could have been.

Not all religious scholars are as skeptical as Bell at the possibilities of trans-cultural religious categories, and some might use examples of rituals such as the *Hachnesat* as a case study to further define the category of 'religion'. Perhaps the most-often cited definition of the term in contemporary cultural anthropology is from Clifford Geertz, the prominent American anthropological semioticist. His definition of religion refers to 'a system of symbols' which serve to establish stable 'moods and motivations' in people through the formation of concepts of a 'general order of existence' that have such an 'aura of factuality' as to seem 'uniquely realistic.'[7] For my purposes here, it is worth focusing on that last key phrase. Geertz's idea is that religion is grounded in a highly potent reality affect; one that makes the religious able to assert a claim to a truth more fundamental than that which comes from other sources (our senses, our reasoning, other cultural forms, etc.). With the *Hachnesat,* that can be seen in the powerful communal affect facilitated by the dancing, singing, pageantry, and so on Amongst other things, that makes religion inherently political, as it provides an unarticulable—and thus unquestionable—ground for social life and thus political life. And so you'll find that many religious scholars often show a *skepticism* of claims to the holy, because of the awareness of how this reality of religion has provided a justification for oppression and violence over the centuries. If the holy is uniquely realistic, it is impervious to discussion or argument, which is why it is frequently surrounded by prohibitions and taboos. We can see this tension in the slight

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than religious experience—without ever being too precise about the difference between those categories—is a concerning one that I think echoes Bell's concern. In my experience, though it would be ridiculous to deny the spirituality of Indian religions, the term 'spirituality' (as opposed to 'religion' has no real resonance for my Indian colleagues. The term functions for the West, as is its design.

6 This is discussed more fully in her *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

7 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hachette, 1973), 90. I have abbreviated Geertz's definition somewhat for the sake of focus.

discomfort of moving the *Hachnesat* into secular public space, and thus seeming to make some sort of ill-defined claim to primacy. At least in one occasion, a London *Hachnesat* has, in fact, led to a successful criminal lawsuit.[8] This question of how to negotiate this 'uniquely realistic' property of religion is one that performance scholars might be able to usefully comment on, and so I will return to it below.

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In contrast to this anthropological reading, let us now consider what might be the focus of a more traditional performance studies reading of these events might focus on. There are a few main themes that immediately leap to mind.

First, one would expect to find a focus on the social framing of the event, and how this framing provided starting points for the forms of interpersonal connection that it evoked, asserted and questioned. The *Hachnesat* was performed by, and (initially) within, a longstanding religious congregation where most members knew each other well, had celebrated major milestones in their lives together, and identified themselves not just as fellow Jews, but as members of the same community. The performance was framed as a celebration and commemoration *by* that community; they were its authors, its participants, and its primary audience.[9] It broke that framing,

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[8] The case was a noise nuisance complaints against a Hassidic rabbi in the London borough of Hackney in 2007. While the magistrate found against the rabbi initially, the decision was reversed by the Crown Court on appeal, some of which depended on the exact nature of 'nuisance.' While the case does not, on the face of it, appear to be about a religious claim to primacy over the public sphere, Samantha Knights argues that noise regulations in diverse cities do offer an interesting test case for the rights of religious acts to occupy (sonic) public space. See Samantha Knights, 'Sacred Space and the City: Religious Buildings and Noise Pollution.' *Harvard International Law Journal* 49 (2008), p. 50-55. For more on the political challenge posed by religious action in public space, see Claire Chambers, Simon du Toit and Joshua Edelman, eds., *Performing Religion in Public* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

[9] Some performance scholars might suggest that, like much prayer, the 'true' or 'ultimate' audience here is a divine one, and the human audience simply stands as a witness to that outside communication. (Many theologians, especially Christian ones, would agree; Kevin Vanhoozer, though frustratingly hard to pin down, makes more or less this argument in his *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)). This, though, is not a fair reading of this event. Many of the Hebrew texts offer prayer or thanks to God, often addressing God in the second person. While these texts were translated in the service booklets provided (and sometimes theatre translations were read out), there was no discussion of God in the English texts composed or in the sermons, talks and explanations by the rabbis on the day. Liberal Judaism, the movement to which this synagogue belongs, does not

however, by entering the secular public realm, an extremely unusual act for a piece of Jewish worship, especially for a liberal synagogue in a neighbourhood in which Jews are a fairly small minority.[10] A wider sense of historical and geographic community was invoked through the ceremony at the Terezen Tree, but the centrality of that local, tight-knit community was solidified by returning to the synagogue, the use of well-known songs and participatory singing, and the constant proxemic and even haptic connections between community members and with event's central object (or prop, in performance studies terms), the Torah scroll.

Next, performance analysis would focus on a quite particular relationship: that between what, in theatrical terms, would be called the relationship between performers and spectators. Like much contemporary experimental theatre, the *Hachnesat* does not have a clear delineation between active participant and passive watcher, but, also like experimental theatre, it was built on a pre-written script known to, and enacted by, one set of participants more than the others. As is the case for professional actors, the congregation's rabbis participate the event with the benefit of their expertise and as part of their professional employment, while congregants, like audience members, are assumed to have a lower level of expertise and have paid for the privilege of participation (either directly, through tickets, or indirectly, through paying an annual membership to the synagogue).[11] But this leadership is often remarkably camouflaged; aside from a few speeches, the majority of the ritual involves congregational participation on what appear to be equal terms with the rabbis. Many people are invited to fill letters in; the community as a whole sings and dances and recites prayers together, even if it is a rabbi who plays the guitar. Performance scholars have recently paid attention to the ways in which, within the limits of the frame set and enforced by the professionals, participants are invited to contribute their own words, actions, or even opinions, which then become part of the ritual. That invitation itself is important and affectively significant, even if it does not lead to a

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necessarily assume that all of its members (or rabbis) believe in God. It would be a mistake to equate the grammatical addressee of the prayers said with the audience of the event.

[10] In the 2011 UK census, 6.6% of Northwood's 10,465 residents identified themselves as Jewish.

[11] Whether or not we should call that first group professionals or 'passionate amateurs' in the sense that Nicholas Ridout develops is another question; the point is that they were positioned as experts in the event. See his *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2013).

radical change in the shape of the event itself, or the power structure that underlies it.[12]

The focus on this relationship can lead, with relative ease, to a discussion of the nature of community. While all the participants of the *Hachnesat,* lay or clerical, are physically, proxemically and emotionally involved in its unfolding, it remains scripted. The invitation is to join in communally: with another person's act of writing, to listen to a speech, to sing along, and to follow a procession. In this ritual, like other communal rituals, the philosopher Jacques Rancière might see the assertion of community which argued prevented the critical distance necessary for the redistribution of the sensible.[13] Here is where performance scholars would point to the both to the institutional framing and the formal structure of an event as necessarily linked to its critical and affective potential. Institutionally, there are certain venues, festivals and so on that house self-consciously avant-garde contemporary theatre, work which tends to approach the relationships it builds between its performers and spectators as itself material that it can deal with creatively and critically. The right to do that critical work, even when it is uncomfortable, is part of the bargain that contemporary theatre audiences make with the performers they watch.[14] The *hachnesat*, in contrast, is a celebration set within an established community, and as such, there is no need to critically interrogate the pre-existing, functional and healthy relationships within that community. Formally, a performance scholar would note the predominance of singing within the *Hachnesat,* and note that the musical frame of a song leaves less room for critical engagement than spoken or written language. In 1974, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch coined a mantra in the study of religious performance: 'you cannot argue with a song.'[15] Bloch was not arguing that a song cannot advocate for and encourage ideas or positions that ought to be scrutinized. Rather, the medium is just too limited; there is no linguistic or musicological space

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12 The recent development of immersive theatre has encouraged this scholarly attention. One of the best sources is Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: The Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

13 See Jacques Rancieèe, *Dissensus*: *On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010).

14 Two experimental theatre companies which take full and fascinating advantage of this right are Ontroerend Goed, from Flanders, and Blast Theory, from England. See, amongst others, Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, 'Radical Intimacy: Ontroerend Goed Meets *The Emancipated Spectator,' Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no 3 (2012), pp. 412-420 and Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi, *Performing Mixed Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).

15 Maurice Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance, and Features of Articulation: Is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?' *European Journal of Sociology* 15, no 1 (1974), p. 71.

within songs for argumentative engagement. They are not propositions defended; they are assertions reiterated.[16]

While a performance scholar might take a formally agnostic stance as to which is more valuable, the critical artistic work or the celebratory community one, it is likely that there would be a subtle or not-so-subtle valorizing of the critical work as more interesting or intellectually engaging, and thus more worthy, that a determined Foucaultian reader could find under such an analysis. This might be less the case if the community celebration was of a marginalized, newly-emerging, or persecuted group, or if the performance scholar identified with the traditions of applied or community theatre (which, while rare in some parts of the world, is less so in the UK). This would not apply to the progressive Jews of North London.

Finally, I want to mention the affective and temporal work that performance scholars might note in this event. They would focus particularly on the tactility of the ritual's acts: holding the hand of the scribe, the tactile act of inscription, guiding the inked quill over the parchment with its outlined but incomplete letters, the crush of people moving in, the embrace of the Torah scroll itself, the group dancing and procession and the close quarters. They might also note the focus on the gaze: the enormous large-group focus on a few dozen small black letters, each with their own tiny serifs and adornments, on the act of becoming a spectacle on the public streets, of being met by the public gaze of neighbours and strangers and the awareness (and perhaps fear) of what that could mean. These are all powerfully affective gestures, and the experience of these events is a constellation of these affects, which reinforce and overlap with one another and whose contradictions needs to be negotiated. A performance scholar might also note how both performances try to deepen this affect by engaging other models of temporality. The *Hachnesat* used the Terezin Tree to

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[16] To explain this point more fully: Bloch argues that rituals tend to be much more formalized and thus limiting in terms of the language, gesture, and other forms of communication they allow. Because of these limitations, these forms are effectively impoverished; they have less ability to pass on meaning than less restrictive communicative forms. Thus it is a bit incorrect to say that rituals have a 'meaning.' As, following Saussure, meaning requires the differentiation between one semantic option and another, then if a ritual is so formally restrictive as to not allow for any significant choice, then it cannot be said to have a meaning. Ritual songs, because they 'almost completely predict the linguistic journey that the singer undertakes,' are necessarily in a situation where 'no argument can be communicated.' (Ibid., p. 71). This form of communication has 'no propositional force. It has only illocutionary force' (Ibid., p. 76). And so Block sees religion as formally *opposed* to politics. Politics, he argues, is based on argumentation, and thus needs agile linguistic tools with which to address a variety of people and situations. Ritual, based on persuasion and the assertion of agreement, has no such need.

build a link between this celebration and the older, now largely lost Jewish traditions of Europe. (In fact, many of the other Torah scrolls that the synagogue uses are ones that were hidden by the Czech Jewish community during WW II, which saved them from destruction; the new Torah is thus another link in this chain of continuity.) What was being celebrated, then, was not just the current act of completion but the continuity of Jewish liturgical life going back, symbolically, to Sinai.

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There are many other ways that performance scholars could read these performances, of course. I do not at all want to suggest that what I just offered is an exhaustive reading, or even a thorough one. But my intention here is to present an interesting and useful counterpoint to the anthropological reading detailed above. In this final section, I would like to use this case study to begin a dialogue between these two approaches,

This task is harder than it might appear because of disciplinary specialisation. Though performance studies, as a discipline, owes its origin to the collaboration between the theatre director and scholar Richard Schechner and the anthropologist of religion Victor Turner in New York in the 1970s, the two disciplines have since drifted much farther apart. While performance studies has recently taken up philosophy as an academic partner, the discipline has not renewed its relationship with anthropology or sociology. While performance scholars certainly have an interest in religious ritual, this has not extended to an acquaintance with the academic sociological or anthropological study of religion. Whatever one thinks of Ronald Grimes's effort to deploy this intellectual tradition to build better, more effective rituals for the modern age,[17] it's virtually unknown to most performance scholars, even to those practice-based researchers who might be thought to be most sympathetic with it.

Nor do contemporary cultural anthropologists often engage with their performance studies colleagues. When anthropology *does* look to performance studies, it has a hard time finding a dialogue partner with which it can work. Many religious scholars see in performance studies a poetic but vague monism that they have worked hard to eliminate from their own discipline. Few ritual theorist have engaged more with notions of performance and performativity than Bell. But even she struggles to find much that can be of use in that dialogue:

> Perhaps the greatest challenge to current performance theory [in its conversation with religious studies] lies in its tendency

[17] See Ronald Grimes. *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002).

> to flirt with universalism, that is, to substitute performance for an older notions of ritual in order to create a new, general model of action.[18]

This charge of 'flirting with universalism' is particularly damning for Bell precisely because of her political concerns that I mentioned above. Religious scholars tend to be hugely wary of how universalist claims can serve as a palatable mask for normative ones, especially those with a colonial history. One major strand of the comparative study of religion was born out of a break with the Christian tradition of the apologetic and missionary engagement with other religions. With that in mind, as I mentioned, cultural anthropology is especially wary of the excessive vague claims to unities across mythologies of some of its 19th century forefathers, especially the so-called Cambridge Anthropologists and James Frazer. For E.B. Tylor, the founding father of cultural anthropology, religion was effectively a fossilized form of (unified) primitive thought that would inevitably decay with human progress. Tylor saw religion—and other forms of culture—in evolutionary terms. He famously wrote in his 1881 classic, *Anthropology,* that

> History, so far as it reaches back, shows arts, sciences, and political institutions beginning in ruder states, and becoming in the course of ages, more intelligent, more systematic, more perfectly arranged or organized, to answer their purposes.[19]

This might be somewhat more nuanced than a Christian polemicist who arranged all the religions of the world on a one-dimensional scale from the most heathen to the most Protestant, but only somewhat. Contemporary religious scholars feel an understandable need to distance themselves from this aspect of their discipline's past.

In an effort to build that distance in the last few decades, some scholars have sought to make the study of religion into a true social science, conducted with all the statistical rigour and attempted objectivity of sociology. Other anthropologists have called for a more reflexive, self-critical understanding of the scholar's position in observing and analyzing religious life. But neither of these is particularly compatible with the ludic, fluid, paradox-loving and always-already-self-undermining inclinations of performance studies. Anthropologists worry that the performative ludic may serve as an unintentional vehicle for dangerously totalizing judgements.

While I understand this concern, I think it is misplaced. The tension around totalization is, in fact, one of the areas in which performance studies can offer a useful

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[18] Catherine Bell. 'Performance,' in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies,* ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 218.

[19] E.B. Tylor, *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881), p. 15

perspective to scholars of religion. Performance studies has paid a great deal of attention to both the ephemeral temporality of performance and the ways in which it echoes after the event itself is over. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan famously wrote:

> Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.[20]

The ephemerality of performance is not simply a question of a quirk of its form; it is part of its very ontology. Performances do not just happen to end; their temporal finality is part of what they are about. Thus, while of course performances have echoes and aftereffects, which have often been discussed with the language of haunting,[21] those effects have a difficult time achieving the level of unquestioning truths *because* they are necessarily memories or resonances of an event that is necessarily over. This ontology of disappearance does not depend on performances being somehow artworks, nor does it depend on either the uniqueness or repetitiveness of any particular instance of a performance. Seeing religious life as being composed of particular *acts,* rather than necessarily as the working out of permanent doctrines, is a suggestion from performance studies that religious scholars may wish to take up.[22]

The two disciplines take very different approaches to the notions of repetition and novelty. As a rule, performance studies tends to emphasize what differentiates each performance from others, while anthropology tends to privilege the connections. Of course, both are true – almost any performance stands within, and can be usefully understood within – a set of traditions, and almost any performance likewise is tailored for and responsive to the particular sociohistorical context in which it exists. How to talk about the users of tradition as thoughtful, creative, critical actors within that tradition is something anthropology might help teach performance studies. How to talk about not just the new, but the *value* of the new as such—what Natalie Heinich calls the 'regime of singularly' that rules the arts[23]—is something that performance

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[20] Peggy Phelan. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146

[21] See, in particular, Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 1996) and Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2003).

[22] This is developed further in the introduction to Chambers, du Toit and Edelman, *Performing Religion in Public.*

[23] See the useful discussion in Rudi Laermans, 'Natalie Heinich, sociologist of the arts: a critical appraisal.' *Boekmancahier* 12, no 46 (2000), pp. 389-402.

studies has developed useful tools for, and these may be of use to religious studies. After all, the *Hachnesat* was a ritual, but it was a unique one. It was designed and created for a single event and will never be performed that way again. This is not, in fact, unusual for religious rituals. The fact that it was a singular event does not necessarily make the *Hachnesat* any less of a ritual, and the fact that it fell into a ritual pattern does not necessarily make its design any less creative. Performance studies has developed useful tools to understand the creative interworkings of novelty and tradition together, not antagonistically.

And finally, the issue of ritual efficacy should be raised. The *Hachnesat* did not just create certain affects: it *accomplished* a goal for the community. This might seem like an aspect where ritual and theatre diverge; ritual has genuine social efficacy while the aesthetic frame means that while theatre can play at transformation, it is prevented from actually accomplishing it. But, like the distinction between ordinary action and ritual action, this line too may be less clear than it might first appear. The affective and intellectual transformations which performances can create are every bit as real as the transition from parchment to scripture. The ways in which theatre effecting real and enduring social transformations has been studied (n different, interesting guises) by a number of theatre and performance scholars. Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the transformative power or performance, Jill Dolan finds 'fleeting moments of utopia' in the theatre, and Hans van Maanen follows the consequences of the Kantian idea that the d intrinsic purpose of art is the proposing of new metaphors– which, for the theatre, means proposing new metaphors for how we are to live together.[24] Yes, the events themselves disappear, but the social transformations, images of utopia, or new models for social life that artistic performances propose can have effective political echoes and effects.

Parallel to this, we should not assume that religious rites of passage always have the effectiveness that they claim for themselves. In classic discussion of pilgrimage, Victor Turner makes a distinction between existential communitas and normative communitas. The former is the sweeping sense of basic human commonality and equality that we associate with the liminal and the mystical. The latter is just enough of it to provide an affective underpinning to and justification for some truly repressive and unequal political systems.[25] Those rituals which seem to

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[24] Erika Fisher-Lichte. *The Transformative Power of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2008). Jill Dolan. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005). Hans van Maanen. *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Value* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2009), esp. pp. 151ff.

[25] See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Penguin, 1974), p. 131ff.

make a claim to existential communitas but in fact reinforce the status quo may, in fact, have less of a social effect than artistic performances which provide a fleeting glimpse of a fictional utopia. The relevant distinction regarding efficacy, I would argue, is not between religion and theatre but between different structural models of rites of passage: those which rely on an authority which is passed from one individual to another, and those, like the *Hachnesat,* in which the community creates a transition as a whole, even if there is professional leadership guiding this.

This kind of analysis, of the particular social and affective work done by a ritual performance such as the *Hachnesat,* is one that scholars of both performance and religion can undertake productively. As I have argued, these two disciplines operate on overlapping subject matters with quite different assumptions and working methods, and therefore, their analyses reveal very different things about these performances and what they model of social performativity. Though they are rarely linked, these two forms of analysis are not, in either principle or practice, incompatible with one another. The lack of dialogue between them reflects their divergent history, a difference that, while we ought to acknowledge and respect, we need not accept as a permanent limitation. To leave the gap unbridged would be a pity. Our analyses of complex, social, political, affective and effective rituals such as the *Hachnesat* would be richer and more fruitful if we were able to draw on both of these intellectual traditions.